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National War College

**A BRIEF INTERVIEW WITH ZHOU ENLAI**

**4-10 SEPTEMBER 1996**

**CORE COURSE ESSAY**

BRICKHOUSE, U S MARINES / CLASS OF 1997

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## **BACKGROUND**

The following interview was conducted 4 thru 10 September 1996 between Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Brickhouse, United States Marine Corps, and the former Premier of the State Council of The People's Republic of China, The Honorable Zhou Enlai. The sites for the interviews were rotated in order to protect the subject from too much scrutiny and interruption. The initial interview took place in the great reception hall of the Chinese Embassy in the Kalorama area of Washington DC. The most fruitful of the subsequent sites was Roosevelt Island in the Potomac River. The Premier likened his fondness of the outdoors to that of the former president for whom the island is named and attributed his personal appreciation of nature to his first trip to Japan in 1917 and, to no small extent, his participation in the "Long March". All the discussions with the Premier were electronically taped to facilitate biographical sketch accumulations in the author's personal library. Out of a necessity for brevity the following is an edited transcription of those tapes. In as much as this interview was granted some twenty year after the death of its subject some favorably selfish hindsight by the Premier may be expected and perhaps warranted. It is my hope that any gross inconsistencies with reality and historical fact, at least as they appear today, be graciously accepted by the reader with a grain of salt and a sympathetic understanding of the difficulty in arranging the interview.

Brickhouse/Alexandria, VA

Brickhouse Question Mr. Premier, we at the National War College of the United States are studying the fundamentals of statecraft and in so doing have been given a list of international statesman for analysis of their skills. Because of the relatively short nature of the analysis we've been directed to look at the various individuals in the context of a major policy event which illustrates their grand strategic design and to determine their success or failure in meeting their policy objectives. The "defining event" or "significant illustration" of the statecraft proffered by the college as your particular contribution to your country and the world is the "Opening of China to the West." Do you agree with this example as the high point of your career?

Zhou Enlai Answer Colonel, you must forgive me but presumptuousness and arrogance are two typically American traits with which I am most familiar. I say presumptuousness because your country unfailingly presumes to identify what is a defining moment for other societies, cultures and civilizations through the prism of purely American bias and experiences. And I say arrogance because your definition of statecraft includes only those things which can be successfully wedged or conveniently overlaid onto some preexisting template or model. You build a paradigm of American experience and prejudices and fail to understand the frequency or rationale of other nation's failures when applied to your constructs. Additionally, I believe the use of such models obviates

originality of thought by your students and forces them consistently to mismeasure with the same yardstick

Categorically though, in the original vein of your question, I would have to say that the opening of China to the West was never in my mind, or that of Chairman Mao's, our defining moment or Grand Stratagem. It may well have happened sooner or very conceivably much later. But its inevitability in today's modern world would never have been misplaced by the Chairman or myself. I would say that my defining success as a statesman would be China's very successful sidestepping of your country's policy of containment and the eventual recognition of Beijing as the rightful seat of Chinese leadership and government.

The key to understanding the reopening of China's doors to the west in the context of our collective Chinese statecraft or my particular diplomacy is that the event transpired when China was prepared for it, not when Moscow, London, Tokyo or Washington willed it. It happened when I, with the concurrence of Chairman Mao, scripted it to happen based on my perception of its aggregate effect throughout the world.

The secret meetings which took place in July 1971 with Dr. Kissinger were not just happenstance. I know that in our joint drafting of the Shanghai Communiqué during that '71 visit Dr. Kissinger was most concerned that we not portray the United States as a supplicant to the Chinese, particularly while your young soldiers and Marines were fighting and dying in Viet Nam. Our goals were much broader and our audience much bigger than that. I was surprised and not a little disappointed in Dr. Kissinger's disingenuousness.

It is a particularly annoying western trait to wrap oneself up in peripherals which have no significant bearing on the salient issues. Begging your forbearance, Colonel, I have to say that with the exception of George Kennan and perhaps Henry's fleeting moments of prescience, American statesmen are not noted for their preparation of the field in anticipation of the game. Jim Baker's savoir faire and Warren Christopher's churlishness notwithstanding, your statesmen always seem involved in some pickup game of ball. There is no readily apparent cogency or consistency to your foreign policy. Instead of wondering who might win credit for the first round of rapprochement with China, Henry might have more astutely attempted to figure the why, the when and the where of our strategy. Instead he seemed prematurely occupied with casting for personal comparisons to Metternich.

Brickhouse Question: Are you suggesting then sir that Americans have an inherently narrow or naive view of the world order and how it is realistically achieved and maintained?

Zhou Enlai Answer: You must understand that of all the large countries, we Chinese are the most aware of the ambiguities of statecraft. Dr. Deibel's model for foreign affairs strategies, despite its American parochialisms, at least defines, displays and explores the interrelationships and interdependence of true statecraft. I understand that Deibel holds a chair at your college, no small wonder that your faculty is so enamored with the model and its architect. Nonetheless.

The challenge to you Americans is to understand and use the breadth of Deibel's model as we Chinese do. You must plum its depths to see it as that multidimensional,

repetitive construct analogous to say . the hall of mirrors at Versailles where every image, though clearly seen, is itself merely repetitive and a reflection of that which precedes and surrounds it The nuances of every social, economic, political, ideological, militaristic or fiscal policy must be laid on Deibel's rack to be twisted and quartered to understand its full meaning in the meetings of men To view the opening of our doors to Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon as some seemingly asequential, amorphous act of statesmanship without understanding its effect on the Soviets, Tibetans, Indians and Pakistanis, indeed all the world, is at best a simplistic view Nor does it allow me the credit I deserve for contriving it

Brickhouse Question: If you'll excuse my candor, you sound very smug as you relate your manipulation of the players prior to the decision by Kissinger on Nixon's behalf.

Zhou Enlai Response Honestly I was a little surprised at America for coming forward as it did, albeit secretly; as it tried to extricate itself from Vietnam I enjoyed meeting with Mr Kissinger and enjoyed his and Mr Lord's attempt to obfuscate the obvious, but from my perspective the opening of our doors was just another step toward assuring China's individuality Another very successful demonstration of China's growing "independence" It was the clarion call of China's commitment not to be a part of any world power struggle Not to be part or parcel to any preconceived balance of power We are not, nor did we aspire to be, a Super Power China has gone to great lengths to insure its independence and most importantly to foster independence in others countries

and governments. I personally have visited over sixty small countries to encourage their self-reliance, to encourage their mutual participation in the great Federation of the world. You're the student of statecraft, Lieutenant Colonel Brickhouse, you tell me. how many times did Ronald Reagan go to Djakarta, Ghana, Tanzania or Gabon? How many times did George Bush or William Clinton go to Guatemala or El Salvador? I was chagrined to see where Jimmy Carter sent Ms. Lillian and Roselyn. What do you think the presidents and ministers of those countries told their citizens? The visit by these two female relatives of the American president identifies our place in the world of nations? I do not mix or confuse sentimentalism with the very real challenges of statecraft. We Chinese understand the spirit of opportunity, of fairness, of being allowed to walk our own individual nationalistic path, encouraging others to seek their own identity bereft of the threat from some "balance of power", some bilaterally sanctioned "hegemony".

Incidentally I was not attempting to be coy or obtuse in reference to Henry or Mr. Lord, but America needed the rapprochement with China much more than China with the United States at that particular time in history. Your president Nixon was, in spite of his now chronicled failings, a true internationalist who I believe felt the need for another primary player on the international stage. Someone to confuse the Soviets' attention. It is unfortunate that he and his frontman misunderstood China's true role. We as a sovereign state never intended to ply the murky water of hegemony. Indeed the Chairman and I took a vehemently dim view of the Soviets' social imperialism. Those were not Chinese troops fighting in Afghanistan. They were not Chinese tanks in first Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea. Nor were our missiles ever on the shores of the Caribbean or the Danube.



My goal as spokesman and representative of the Chinese people was never to misrepresent her as a First or even Second Tier World Power. We were simply China and our role was solely that as participant of "united front politics." It is true that we have a vigorous foreign aid program to which I personally paid close heed. It is also true that our aid has never been offered under the guise of friendship with the real intent of garnering the recipients' fealty for some obscure future motive. I believe that history has thus far borne me out. The new realism is not that of power politics as waged between the old Soviet Union and yourselves, but rather the newfound independence and self-reliance of those Third Tier countries China has sought to help.

If you look at what remains of the former Soviet Union today you will see that their strategies were flawed and their assets of national power grossly misused. My strategy, Mao's strategy, indeed China's strategy is one of equilibrium not balance of power between a handful of powerful states. The Soviets never established the independence of their friends. They never assisted in fostering self-reliance and instead built a base of client states indentured to their economy and they as prophesied went bankrupt in the process. Financially, politically, economically and ideologically our former communist brothers ceased to exist in an appreciable sense on the world stage. A stage they fought so long to influence and control. I believe the Soviets and the Americans are undisciplined and the latter, like the former, will eventually be eaten by their own failed ambitions and their inability to prioritize the true national needs of their people as we have in China. The people need stability in leadership, stability in government and a stable nonintrusive relationship with the rest of the world. I am amazed that Americans so

readily tout the market economy and supply side economics and yet in the same breath attempt to legislate all other peoples' forms of government

Brickhouse Question Before we move too far down the path, I want to go back and try to get you to identify your rationale for pushing China in a direction way which seemed at odds with the rest of the world.

Zhou Enlai . Answer Colonel, despite my previous comments about your feebly western attempts to simplify the ambiguities of statecraft by using models, I'll clarify my actions by referring to several constructs or matrices to assist you in understanding my points. They are models which I am sure you are comfortable with, namely those of Dr. Deibel and Dr Nuechterlein.

The first tier of either Deibel's and Nuechterlein constructs are in my opinion essentially the same Deibel's "Assumptions" based on "international" and "domestic environments" equate in realist's terms to Maslow's, I mean Nuechterlein's "Defense of Homeland" or a survival need Our focus Chairman Mao's and mine, has always been China's independence as a state We have never tried or attempted to thrust ourselves on the world as it were Our domestic environment, our independence, has always driven our international perspective and hence our role in the international environment I would imagine that some neophytes of eastern history may hazard an opinion that China as a modern nation state never existed Yet throughout thousands of years of dynastic rule we had not only existed but flourished as a very homogenous and independent state And though we periodically had porous borders, we have always retained our individuality.

our sense of singularity as a nation. It was only in the last three hundred years through force and coercion that the European Powers sought to advantage themselves of our prosperity and the potential lucrativeness of our markets. Were you aware that the British gross sales in opium in China went from 200 chests in 1729 to 23 thousand chests a scant hundred years later? An increase of 1000%.

I do not feel that our historical relationship with other, particularly European states, has been one that fostered responsible interdependency between nations. I have successfully fought incrementally to change that in Africa and Asia. We Chinese believe we can retain our uniqueness without denying our international growth or participation in the world. We do however insist on accomplishing our priorities the Chinese way and will not be coerced by the United States or those that take the Soviets' place.

Brickhouse Question: I have one last question today and then we can perhaps resume again tomorrow. You criticized our models but used them as a departure point for discourse on international and domestic environments. If your singularity of purpose as a statesman is appropriate representation of the people of China concomitant with your overarching concerns for the continued defense and perpetual prosperity of that nation state, how do you rationalize the violent reaction to the most recent democratic movement as illustrated by Tiananmen Square in 1989? Don't such liberal excursions and popular revolts indicate that there may exist some dissatisfaction with the prioritization of your efforts at internal and external statecraft?

Zhou Enlai Response I use the models you are familiar with to increase the opportunity for your understanding of our Chinese methods and goals I do not know that you can fathom intellectually or intuitively what you construe to be the paradox of modern China. There is no paradox. The revolution is important Ideology is important. But first and foremost is the state and its people. The revolution is the implement not the determinant by which we gird ourselves against hegemonism without and reactionism within. Our revolution is a means not an end You ask about Tiananmen In a country of over one billion men, women, and children are you naive enough to think that several thousand unhappy people represent the national psyche? Or that the unfortunate deaths of 700 unlawful or misguided people cast even the faintest pallor on the greatness of the entire state? You Americans kill more than 700 people a month on your highways due to alcohol

As a serviceman in America you take an oath to protect and defend your constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic. Deibel's model clearly discusses "opportunities and threats" in its second tier Is the threat to the state any less poignant or real if it comes from within? Our people, the Chinese people, have always been our greatest resource. which is not to suggest that they may not become, on occasion, a threat to themselves You must be a realist, just as Nixon and Kissinger attempted to be. Your objectives must correlate to your resources and power and . . . your willingness to use them Tiananmen was a tragedy which might well have been avoided had Zhao Ziyang acted more forcefully and more timely It was nonetheless in the national interest to see it ended favorably and in balance for the state

You must look seriously if you are to see and understand China's world view

Admittedly, I am somewhat of a closet Kennanite. To use a favorite Chinese colloquialism, he "hit the nail on the head", in his "long telegram." I was fortunate to get a copy from our man in your State Department before it was unclassified. Fortunately for us we recognized the Soviets' xenophobia early on. That is why we so endorsed NATO and the United States' role in countering overseas Soviet adventures. That is why I have so vigorously eschewed being mistakenly aligned with the Soviet or American camps. Our bilateral relationships with our neighbors and our normalization with the United States insured our borders for sufficient time to consolidate our postwar, post cultural revolutionary gains internally, without falling prey to the ardent leftists or building a Soviet style bureaucracy. It has always been one of our greatest national challenges. maintaining the balance between the radical leftists, the pure ideologues, and the threat of such an unwieldy bureaucracy which may stifle any opportunity for growth and constructive change. You know that some of your historians, biographers and political scientists believe that Kennan was really an elitist. I am surprised I have not been so branded myself. I have to confess down in my revolutionary bones that I believe that the common man, the worker, has little understanding of international needs and concerns of a great nation state. I also have come to the regrettable conclusion that those things which will bear most profoundly on a people within a state must be decided by professional statesman unfettered by consensus and elaborate constituency debate. There can be no popular policy save that of the continuance of the state. Popular interest is inextricably tied to the national interest, which in China's case is best designed and defined

by individuals who understand the building, use and application of all sources of power

Individuals like myself

**Endnote:**

The interviewer does not presume to identify the sources of the Premier's remarks. They are logically his personal recollections and experiences which reflect the preponderance of a century of revolution, tumult, governance and diplomacy.

Should any further readings be required in order to amplify the Premier's remarks, the following may be referred to.

- a Dick Wilson, Zhou Enlai: A Biography, (New York, Viking Penguin Books, 1986)
- b Ronald Keith, The Diplomacy of Cho En-lai, (New York, ST Martins Press, 1989)
- c Li T'ien-min, "The Question of Cho En-lai," The Nation, May 1, 1976
- d Kuo-kang Shao, "Zhou Enlai's Diplomacy and the Neutralization of Indo-China, 1954," The China Quarterly, September, 1986
- e Lung-Kuang-p'u, "Chou En-lai: A Judgement," Issues and Studies, March, 1976.